

Phil 330: Feminist Philosophy
Spring 2023, Ding

Simone de Beauvoir, Selections from *The Second Sex* (1949)

Beauvoir's famous question: What is a woman?

"Very simple, say those who like simple answers: She is a womb, an ovary; she is a female" (p. 21).

- But this can't be right: it fails to explain how we think and talk about womanhood (p. 3).
- Rather, being a woman turns on this "femininity" thing: "So not every female human being is necessarily a woman; she must take part in this mysterious and endangered reality known as femininity" (p. 3).

So, what is this "mysterious" thing called "femininity" or "womanhood"?

- *The traditional philosophical answer*: it is an immutable *essence*.
 - Beauvoir: This, too, can't be right. Just like an essential Blackness or Jewishness is disreputable, an immutable femininity is too spooky at best.
- *The "American" answer*: "woman" has no meaning; we are all *just* human beings.
 - Beauvoir: "To reject the notions of the eternal feminine, the black soul, or the Jewish character is not to deny that there are today Jews, blacks, or women: this denial is not a liberation for those concerned but an inauthentic flight. Clearly, no woman can claim without bad faith to be situated beyond her sex" (p. 4).

Beauvoir's own answer:

- *Pace* the American answer: to be a woman *is* to be subordinate, to be "inferior to men" (p. 12)—it is to be the Other (p. 6).
- *Pace* both the traditional philosophical answer and the simple answer: this "is" is a deeply *socially contingent* one; it is not in women's nature to be inferior—"the question is whether this state of affairs must be perpetuated" (p. 13).

Woman as the Other

Her motivating example: "You think such and such a thing because you're a woman" (p. 5).

- *Women's relation to men and humanity*: "Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being" (p. 5)
 - Man is both man and human—the Universal, the Absolute, the Subject.
 - Woman is the lack thereof—the Particular, the Other (relative to men), the Sex (to be taken by men).
- *The separate-but-equal status of women's subordination*: women's place in society is not grasped as unequal—*merely* different, perhaps pleasantly *complimentary*.
- *The ahistoricity of woman's subordination*: women's subordination "is not the consequence of an event or a becoming, it did not happen" in history (p. 8).
 - Unlike Black or Jewish people, women did not become subordinated because of a sheer numerical disadvantage—women are not a numerical minority (p. 7).
 - Unlike proletarians, women have always been there: "there have always been women; they are women by their physiological structure" (p. 8). (Is this compatible with thinking of womanhood as a socially contingent situation?)
 - Instead, "as far back as history can be traced, they have always been subordinate to men" (p. 8).

Woman as a social becoming, as a situation

The sentence that set the world on fire: “On ne naît pas femme: on le devient.”

- Popular translation: “Women are made, not born.”
- Parshley translation: “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman.”
- Borde & Malovany-Chevallier translation: “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman.”
 - They explain the decision to omit the indefinite article in the Translators’ Note: “‘Woman’ in English used alone without an article captures woman as an institution, a concept, femininity as determined and defined by society, culture, history.”

The disagreement as to how this sentence ought to be translated encapsulates a much broader disagreement as to how Beauvoir ought to be read (which is itself broadly connected to the divide between contemporary Anglo-American/“analytic” philosophy and mainland European/“continental” philosophy):

- *The social constructivist reading*: gender is the social meaning of sex (understood as reproductive biology); to become a woman is to be inducted—socialized—into the social institution of womanhood.
 - But note that even though the social constructivist reading, so understood, challenges the prevailing understanding of gender as biological, it does so precisely by preserving an understanding of sex as very much biological. This is a strategy that later feminists would find fault with.
- *The existentialist reading*: As Bonnie Mann explains it, “to ‘become’ a woman is not the same as to be made into one, as if one were exclusively a passive object being acted on by external social forces. . . . To ‘become’ is to actively take up one’s social condition in a way that is, at least potentially, spontaneous, creative and free. . . . On this view, Beauvoir could never be understood to have claimed that ‘women are made not born.’”¹

A relevant example to look at: menstruation, pp. 327-29.

- A wide array of reactions: from confusion to horror to pride to shame.
- The meaning of menstruation is social, not biological: “Just as the penis gets its privileged value from the social context, the social context makes menstruation a malediction. One symbolizes virility and the other femininity: it is because femininity means alterity and inferiority that its revelation is met with shame” (p. 329).
- But still it is a biological fate that one has to reckon with? “If she has already assumed her condition, she welcomes the event with joy: ‘Now you are a lady.’ If she has always refused it, the bloody verdict strikes her like lightning; most often, she hesitates: the menstrual stain inclines her toward disgust and fear. ‘So this is what these words mean: being a woman!’ The fate that until now has weighed on her ambivalently and from the outside is lodged in her belly; there is no escape; she feels trapped.” (p. 329).

Some complications to consider:

- Even if one is sympathetic to the social constructivist reading, does it really make sense to say any particular individual *becomes woman the social institution*?
- Are the two readings mutually exclusive? Does, for example, the social constructivist reading have to deny the possibility of agency in socialization?
 - A case in point: is it really fair to say that trans women are “socialized as male”?

¹ Bonnie Mann, “Introduction,” in “*On Ne Naît Pas Femme: On Le Devient*”: *The Life of a Sentence*, ed. Bonnie Mann and Martina Ferrari (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 3-4.